



# **BUSTING BEERSHEBA:**

## **AUSTRALIANS IN THE CAMPAIGN TO DEFEAT**

### **THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE**



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# Beyond Beersheba

Richard Chauvel<sup>1</sup>



## Introduction

This paper has three parts. Following the introduction, the paper will discuss aspects of General Sir Harry Chauvel's account of the campaign. Then, it will examine how the campaign has been memorialized. The paper will contrast the complexity of the historical, political and cultural context of the campaign with the reductive memorialization of the campaign with its focus on the charge of the Light Horse at Beersheba.

The Australian Light Horse fought in the Sinai, Palestine and Syria campaign as part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. Initially the EEF was under the command of Sir Archibald Murray, then from mid 1917, under Sir Edmund Allenby. The EEF drew on forces from across the British Empire, including English, Scottish, Irish, Indian and New Zealand units, along with the Light Horse. Under Allenby, the EEF was re-structured into three Corps, with Sir Harry Chauvel, as the first Australian commander of a Corps – the Desert Mounted Corps – with New Zealand, English forces and the Hong Kong and Singapore Camel Battery, along with the Australian Light Horse under his command.

The campaign began with the defence of the Suez Canal at the Battle of Romani in August 1916 and came to an end with the armistice on 30 October 1918, after the capture of Damascus, Aleppo and Beirut. The armistice marked the end of four centuries of Ottoman rule, and through, the medium of British and French mandates under the League of Nations, facilitated the establishment of the nation states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel, along with the Palestinian Territories, over the following three decades. The EEF's successful campaign against the Ottoman Empire followed a long history of military conquests through which the region was incorporated in Assyrian, Babylonian, Israelite, Hellenic, Roman, Egyptian, Crusader and Arab polities. The region that gave birth to Judaism and Christianity, at the time of the EEF's conquest, had a multi-ethnic and multi-faith population in which Muslims constituted a majority.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Chauvel is an Honorary Fellow at the Asia Institute, the University of Melbourne. He is the grandson of Harry Chauvel.

The region's long contested history and complex plural societies were further complicated by two more recent phenomena – Arab nationalism and Jewish Zionist migration into Palestine – both of which would interact with and shape British and French strategic ambitions during and after the war. British policy sought to harness Arab nationalism and anti-Ottoman sentiment, as manifested in the “Arab Revolt” led by the Sharif of Mecca, in the campaign against the Ottomans.

The British endeavor to co-opt the Arab opposition to Ottoman rule was initially expressed in the correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, and Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca in October 1915. McMahon wrote that “...Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs within the territories in the limits and boundaries proposed by the Sherif of Mecca...” with the exception of the “...districts of Mersina and Alexandretta, and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo, cannot be said to be purely Arab...”.<sup>2</sup> Whether the territory promised to Hussein bin Ali included Palestine remained a matter of contention among British policy makers long after the war.<sup>3</sup>

On the eve of war there were an estimated 80,000 Jews in Palestine, constituting around 10% of the total population. Inspired by the ideals of Zionism to create a Jewish national home in Palestine, around 55,000 of the Jewish population had immigrated to Palestine since the 1880s, mainly from Russia and Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> In November 1917 the British Government issued the “Balfour Declaration” in a letter, 2 November 1917, to Lord Rothschild:

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.<sup>5</sup>

A further dimension of British policy was reflected in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 that anticipated the post-war division of the former Ottoman territories between Britain and France, with the agreement of Czarist Russia. Under the Agreement, Britain's sphere would cover the coastal area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river, Jordan and Iraq. France would administer Lebanon and Syria. These French and British spheres of influence were formalized as mandates under the League of Nations. The objectives of the Balfour Declaration were incorporated in the British mandate in Palestine.

The pragmatic considerations that prompted the British Government to make contradictory commitments to the Sharif of Mecca and Lord Rothschild must have seemed compelling with the outcome of the war both in Europe and the Middle East uncertain. The policy makers in the British Cabinet could not have envisaged that the consequences of their conflicting commitments would still reverberate a century later. The tensions around the post-war nation state structures in Syria, Iraq, Israel and the Palestinian Territories have origins in wartime British policies and the contending forces of Arab and Jewish nationalisms.

### **Chauvel's observations of the campaign**

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<sup>2</sup> Letter, McMahon to Hussein, 24-10-1915, cited in McMahon–Hussein Correspondence, [https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/McMahon%E2%80%9393Hussein\\_Correspondence.html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/McMahon%E2%80%9393Hussein_Correspondence.html)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> “Jewish immigration to Historical Palestine”.

[https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cjpme/pages/985/attachments/original/1424469763/181-En-Jewish\\_immigration-v5.pdf?1424469763](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cjpme/pages/985/attachments/original/1424469763/181-En-Jewish_immigration-v5.pdf?1424469763)

<sup>5</sup> Balfour Declaration: text of the declaration, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-balfour-declaration>

This paper will examine Harry Chauvel's observations of the campaign from the Canal to Damascus. Chauvel's account of the campaign was mostly in the form of his letters to his wife written often within a day or so of the events he describes.<sup>6</sup> The letters were written within the constraints of military censorship. In telling his wife of the capture of Beersheba, Chauvel referred to a "Biblical" town because the censors would not permit him to name it.

In his diary-like account of the campaign some events come across as more important than others. Read together, Chauvel's letters were an account of the campaign, beginning with the defence of the Suez Canal and ending with the capture of Damascus and Aleppo marking the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, rather than of individual battles. In his accounts of his relations with other senior officers and especially the EEF commanders, Murray and Allenby, Chauvel conveyed the sense that he and the Australian Light Horse were part of a much larger Imperial force and under his command were units from other parts of the Empire, not only the Australian Light Horse. While he did not consider himself a scholar of the region, his letters convey a good understanding of Biblical history and the military history of the region. Chauvel had a strong sense of following in the footsteps of earlier military commanders like Judas Maccabeus, Salahuddin Ayyub and Napoleon. In his letters, Chauvel often noted how the history of religious and cultural change were reflected in the places he visited.

Chauvel recognized that the successful capture of Romani, on the Mediterranean coast of Sinai, in August 1916 was of "strategic" importance. Along side his own letters about the capture of Romani, Chauvel included in his War Book British press accounts depicting the "Colonial Horsemen" as being ideal troops to operate in front of our defenses. "They (the Colonial Horsemen) acquitted themselves magnificently." Chauvel's division was the "cream of the Colonial Troops."<sup>7</sup>

The Charge of the Light Horse at Beersheba has become the symbolic focus of much of the commemoration of the Palestine and Syria campaign. Writing to his wife from the Turkish commander's house in Beersheba the following evening, Chauvel understood the significance of the Light Horses' achievement. He related: "The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade got off about half past four, trolled on to the plain and then rode at the trenches, charging them mounted and galloped straight into the town which was in our possession by dark. By this mounted action, Grant had done in a few minutes, with two regiments and with fewer casualties, what it would probably have taken two brigades, dismounted, a couple of hours to do. So far as I know, such a charge by mounted men against entrenched infantry is unique in the annals of cavalry... We had a great battle yesterday and an entirely successful one, but it was a long business and a hard fight... it was a very brilliant performance..." He related that Allenby had motored over to Beersheba and decorated Grant with a bar to his DSO.<sup>8</sup>

Chauvel recognised Beersheba was a "Biblical" town, but as it turned out Abraham's seven wells were not the bountiful source of water expected. In other respects, he was not greatly impressed with Beersheba, describing it as "merely an Arab town with about four decent, almost European, houses in it, obviously new and a rather fine hospital and a better mosque than one would expect."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chauvel's letters to his wife are held in his papers at the Australia War Memorial, Canberra. Many of the letters were transcribed by Lady Chauvel and together with contemporary newspaper articles and other materials became two volumes of "Chauvel War Book", also held in the AWM.

<sup>7</sup> Chauvel War Book, V 1

<sup>8</sup> Chauvel War Book, V 2, p. 36, Letter, 1-11-1917

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*



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*Chauvel with Chief of Staff and ADC in front of the Mosque in Beersheba*

After the capture of Beersheba in October 1917, Chauvel established the Desert Mounted Corps HQ in the Jewish colony of Rehoboth (Khirbet Dieran), not far from Jaffa, and remained there for 5 months. His descriptions of the experience were informed by his knowledge of the Bible and biblical history. In December 1917 Chauvel wrote to his wife relating that he had been invited to a dinner in Rehoboth to celebrate the liberation of Jerusalem by Judas Maccabeus in 164 BCE. Chauvel was able to tell his hosts of the surrender of Jerusalem to General Allenby earlier in the day. Chauvel recorded that this news was “all food for great oratory” in which it was related that Judas Maccabeus had fought in the same places the Light Horse had fought.<sup>10</sup> In another letter of 27 January 1918 Chauvel told his wife of a dinner in Rehoboth at which the Mayor informed Chauvel of the tradition dating from Moses’ time of planting trees to mark peace and freedom. He was asked to plant two trees, one for the British Government and one for the community. The children of the Rehoboth sang the “Jewish national song” of which Chauvel wrote was “the most beautiful thing I had ever heard”. He told his wife: “...I made rather a bungle of planting two very bushy young olive trees in the moonlight. I sincerely hope they will grow!”<sup>11</sup>

In August 1918, after the campaign moved on towards Damascus, the Committee of the Rehoboth Colony wrote the following to Chauvel:

No statutes, no monuments do we, wandering sons of Israel, exist in honor of the man we cherish, whose memories we are eager to preserve for our descendants. Being homeless, we possess no ground to build upon. All that we have is a book, - our

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<sup>10</sup> Chauvel War Book, v2, p. 56, Letter, 13-12-17,

<sup>11</sup> Chauvel War Book, v 2, p. 66 Letter, , 27-1-18

history. In the annals of this history of ours we are anxious to have you inscribed among the friends and benefactors of our people.

We trust you will kindly favor us by accepting this document as a token of our sentiments of love and gratitude.<sup>12</sup>

This letter was framed and displayed on the mantelpiece in Chauvel's home in South Yarra after the war and long after his death in 1945.



*Chauvel established his HQ in the colony of Rehovot*

Chauvel visited Jerusalem on a number of occasions and his accounts reflect the way his sense of history and interest in religious change informed his experience. On 19th March 1918 Chauvel was invested with a KCMG by the Duke of Connaught, along with Allenby and other senior commanders. The ceremony took place in the old barrack square behind the Tower of David. After the investiture, the officers had to walk back to the Jaffa Gate adorned with their decorations "...looking like a lot of prize shorthorns in a show ring". After the investiture, Chauvel visited the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of Omar. He notes that the Dome of the Rock was built on the site of Solomon's Temple, which was in his opinion "much the finest thing and I think really the oldest, to be seen in Jerusalem. The mosaic work and the glass windows are perfectly beautiful." He understood that the Mosque of el-Aska, in the same enclosure has more title to be called the Mosque of Omar. It appears to have been a mosque, a Christian Church and a mosque again. It retains the Cruciform shape of a church and amongst the sacred places contained there-in is "the foot-print of Jesus" on a rock in a mihrab or Muslim place of pray indicating the direction of Mecca.

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<sup>12</sup> Letter, Committee of the Colony "Rehoboth" near Jaffa to Sir Harry Chauvel, Lt. General, Desert Mounted Corps, 14 August 1918

Chauvel notes: “It is only in this part of the world that the three great religions are woven into one another and at the same time their devotees so bitterly opposed to each other.”<sup>13</sup>

At the end of July 1918, Chauvel attended the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the Hebrew University, on Mt. Scopus, which is really part of the Mount of Olives. It was an interesting ceremony, but he thought was badly run. There were fourteen stones laid, one for each of the twelve tribes, one for the Christian religion (laid by the Bishop in Jerusalem) and one for the Muslims (laid by the Grand Mufti). There were thousands of Jews there, and there was afternoon tea afterwards, and I was waited on, in company with the Grand Mufti and General Shea, by pretty Jewesses.”<sup>14</sup>

## Damascus



*Show of force in Damascus*

Chauvel’s interest in military history and how Islamic and Christian influences were accommodated was also evident in his account of Damascus. A few days after the Light Horses’ entrance into Damascus, and after some order had been restored, he made a “pilgrimage” to the tomb of Salahuddin Ayyub, a Kurd, who defeated the Crusaders in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and who was one of Chauvel’s heroes. Chauvel wrote to his wife, with pride, that he had been told he was regarded as Salahuddin’s immediate successor as regards the capture of Damascus. He also visited the tomb of the head of John the Baptist, under the dome of the Umayyad Mosque, which he notes had previously been the Basilica of St John the Baptist prior to the Arab conquest. He observed that the tomb had not only been preserved but ornamented in a manner similar to Abraham’s and other tombs he had seen during the campaign.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Chauvel, War Book, vol 2, pp 78-80, Letter, 20-3-1918

<sup>14</sup> Chauvel War Book V 2, p. 101, Letter, 28-7-1918

<sup>15</sup> Chauvel War Book, v2, p. 123

Chauvel regarded the capture of Damascus as a significant military achievement. Damascus was the major Arab city captured in the campaign. He told his wife that "...we have had a great and glorious time." Allenby had visited and told him the Light Horses' performance was the "...greatest Cavalry feat the world had ever known."<sup>16</sup>

Damascus was also where Chauvel had the greatest involvement in the political and policy dimensions of the campaign. It was where he encountered the Emir Faisal, son of the Sharif of Mecca, and T. E. Lawrence, the British liaison officer with Faisal. He was much more impressed with Faisal than Lawrence. He became aware of the conflicting British commitments to the Sharif of Mecca and the division of spheres of influence with the French under the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

At stake in Damascus was not merely the issue of whether it was the Light Horse or Faisal's Hedjaz Arabs that 'liberated' Damascus, but more importantly for the political future of Damascus and Syria, under whose authority would Damascus be placed. Faisal understood from the British promises made to his father that Damascus would be placed under his control. Chauvel made sure that the administration and public order of Damascus was established under his authority, as the successor regime to the Ottomans. To make this clear to Faisal, Lawrence and the residents of Damascus, he established himself in Jamal Pasha's, the Turkish Governor, house and led the Desert Mounted Corps in a march, a show of force, through Damascus.



*Faisal and Allenby in Damskus*

On 3 October 1918, Chauvel attended a meeting with Allenby, Faisal and Lawrence at the Victoria Hotel in Damascus. Allenby explained the seeming contradictions between the British promises to Faisal's father and what had been agreed with the French in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Allenby told Faisal that he would head the administration of Syria, excluding Palestine and Lebanon, under French political guidance and financial support. It was evident from the discussion that Lawrence had not told Faisal anything about the French mandate or the much-reduced territory under his control in Syria.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Chauvel War Book, v2, p. 118

<sup>17</sup> Alec Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse*, pp. 184-5. Faisal was king of Syria only until 1920, after which he was appointed king of Iraq under British patronage until 1933.

## How we remember and what we remember – Memorial Diplomacy

The focus on the Charge of the light horse at Beersheba has a long history. George Lambert's magnificent painting may have been an early influence. The two films celebrating the light horse and the charge – Charles Chauvel's *Forty Thousand Horsemen* and Simon Wincer and Ian Jones' *The Lighthorsemen* (1987) – probably reached a broader Australian audience. In the political sphere, Joe Hockey's 1996 maiden speech in the House of Representatives was a unique contribution given that after the Ottoman defeat his grandfather was deputy district commissioner in Beersheba tasked with rebuilding the town. Hockey spoke of how 800 young Australians, against impossible odds, helped change the course of the First World War. "Their charge was more than courage. It was more than defiance against oppression. It was an act of pure faith in the future- and perhaps our finest illustration of that quality that we call the Australian spirit."<sup>18</sup>

Sam Lipski, CEO and executive trustee of the Pratt Foundation, highlighted the Australian contribution to the establishment of Israel through the chronological coincidence of the British Cabinet decision to issue the Balfour Declaration and the Charge at Beersheba.<sup>19</sup> While the letter to Lord Rothschild was dated 2 November, the Cabinet decision was on 31 October – the day of the Charge. The significance of the Balfour Declaration, in Lipski's opinion, was that it was the first time a world power had recognised Jewish rights to a homeland in Palestine, at a time when Zionist influence in Jewish communities in Europe and North America was relatively marginal. The Declaration galvanised Jewish opinion. Lipski argues that the capture of Beersheba opened the EEF's way into Palestine and the capture of Jerusalem, after the failure of attempts to capture Gaza. He contends the capture of Beersheba changed the course of history

Lipski related the fascinating story of his proposal to Richard Pratt to build a memorial at Beersheba to the Light Horse to show Australia's contribution to the establishment of Israel three decades later. Pratt was convinced by his old friend 'Digger' James' support for the Beersheba memorial. Major General James was head of the Australian Light Horse Association, as well as head of the RSL and Chair of the Australian War Memorial. The proposal came to fruition with the opening of the Park of the Australian Soldier in 2008 by President Shimon Peres and Governor-General Michael Jeffery, with its Peter Collet sculpture of a light horseman jumping of a Turkish trench. Lipski related how the face of the horseman in the sculpture was that of 'Digger' James.

One of the remarkable sidelights of the opening of the Park in 2008 that took place just out of sight of the statue of General Allenby in the centre of Beersheba was that in none of the speeches was there any mention of the British.<sup>20</sup> Neither that the Light Horse was part of the much larger Egyptian Expeditionary Forces led by Allenby nor that English and Scottish Horse Artillery and infantry from 60<sup>th</sup> London and 74<sup>th</sup> Yeomanry had been crucial in the morning and early afternoon attack on Beersheba prior to the Charge in the late afternoon

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<sup>18</sup> Joe Hockey, maiden speech, House of Representatives, 10-9-1996,

<http://australianpolitics.com/1996/09/10/joe-hockey-lib-north-sydney-maiden-speech.html>

<sup>19</sup> Sam Lipski, address to the Sydney Institute, 16-11-2017, <https://thesydneyinstitute.com.au/blog/beersheba-1917-2017-the-commemoration-of-the-australian-light-horse/>

<sup>20</sup> The author attended the opening of the Park as a guest of the Pratt Foundation.

was acknowledged. The casualties suffered in this phase of the attack on Beersheba were much greater in the Charge itself.<sup>21</sup>

Beersheba's role in the Australia – Israel relationship was further consolidated in 2017 with the visit of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu to Australia in February and the commemoration of the centenary of the Charge in October. Netanyahu repeated several times on the first day of his visit how much Australia had done for Israel, from liberating Beersheba to its key role at the UN in the establishment of Israel in 1947.<sup>22</sup> At the centennial commemorations in Beersheba, Netanyahu was more explicit in linking the liberation of Beersheba by the Light Horse with the establishment of the state of Israel:

“Exactly 100 years ago, brave ANZAC soldiers liberated Beersheba for the sons and daughters of Abraham and opened the gateway for the Jewish people to reenter the stage of history...ending 400 years of Ottoman rule in one great dash.”<sup>23</sup>



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<sup>21</sup> Jean Bou, “A remarkable feat of arms”, Defence Special Report, *The Australian*, October 2017 <https://specialreports.theaustralian.com.au/888793/a-remarkable-feat-of-arms/> Military historian Jean Bou reminds us that the attack on Beersheba was part of a larger scale operation to dislodge the Ottoman forces from southern Palestine. As such the capture of Beersheba was not a decisive moment in the campaign. The Ottoman forces had been on the defensive since Romani, but there was a further year of hard fighting before the campaign was over. This special report of the Weekend Australian was sponsored by the Pratt Foundation.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Fitzpatrick and Rosie Lewis, “Benjamin Netanyahu in Australia: praise for Abbott and Howard”, *The Australian*, 22-2-2017, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/benjamin-netanyahu-in-historic-visit-to-australia/news-story/d454857a83b20116057d93f802b07ee7>

<sup>23</sup> “Ceremony honoring the ANZAC Soldiers who fell during WWI”, *J-Wire*, 1-11-2017 <http://www.jwire.com.au/ceremony-honoring-the-anzac-soldiers-who-fell-during-wwi/>

On the same occasion, Malcolm Turnbull was somewhat more circumspect in at least seeing the capture of Beersheba as apart of a process that three decades later enabled the establishment of Israel.

They spurred their horses through that fire, those mad Australians, through that fire and took the town of Beersheba, secured the victory. That did not create the State of Israel but enabled its creation.

Had the Ottoman rule in Palestine and Syria not been overthrown by the Australians and the New Zealanders, the Balfour Declaration would have been empty words.

But this was a step for the creation of Israel and with their courage.<sup>24</sup>

On the same visit Turnbull also met with the Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah. The Palestinian leader asked Turnbull why Palestinian representatives had not been invited to the commemoration of the Battle of Beersheba. With the “Arab Revolt” and Faisal’s Arab troops in mind, the Palestinians reminded Turnbull they had supported the British against the Ottomans and should have been invited to the ceremony.<sup>25</sup>

Rami Hamdallah’s remark to Turnbull was probably not much more than a throw away line, but it does remind us that the other states that emerged from the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the EEF have a different understanding of the campaign and its far-reaching consequences than that celebrated with the opening of the Park of the Australian Soldier in 2008 and the centennial commemoration in Beersheba in 2017. Whatever regime is in power in Damascus in October 2018, it seems improbable that there will be commemorations of the liberation of Damascus by either the Light Horse or Faisal’s Hijaz Arabs.

The use of historical events to support and legitimise contemporary diplomatic relationships and political objectives is unexceptional, but it is important these activities are seen for what they are and remember that the military campaign and its political and strategic consequences are much more complex and important to understand.

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<sup>24</sup> Speech at the Centenary of the Battle of Beersheba Commemorations, 31-10-2017  
<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/speech-centenary-battle-beersheba-commemorations>

<sup>25</sup> Sophie McNeill, “Battle of Beersheba: Palestinians ask Malcolm Turnbull why they weren't invited to services”, 2-11-2017, <https://global-factiva-com.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/redirect/default.aspx?P=sa&NS=18&AID=9UNI026900&an=ABCNEW0020171102edb200005&cat=A&ep=ASI&napc=EV>